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COLLECTING AND INTERPRETING PLAYGROUND GAMES: A CHILDREN'S MUSEUM PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the activities and results of a project on children's games carried out for the Portland Children's Museum during the summer of 1986. The purpose of the project was to explore ways in which the Museum might develop exhibits and collections related to children's playground games. Several activities contributed to this broad aim -- library research; field observation; interviews with educators, supervisors and children; video recording; the production of two video documentaries on the project itself; and the development of two prototype video exhibits. This article describes some of these activities and several findings of the study. Finally, some of the Museum's plans in the area of children's games are set forth.

Background and Rationale for Collecting Games

The project began with the assumption that children's games are worth observing and thinking about. This view can hardly be disputed, but at least some discussion of the significance of children's games is in order at the outset. Games are, first of all, recreation. They are a prime outlet of the play urge, an urge which seems universal and which of course, may be expressed in many other ways (e.g., reading, television, toys, free play). If a society values its children it must concern itself with the things they do to fill their time and playing games is a crucial activity of childhood.

The process of collecting and recording games is valuable because it can tell us about the culture under study as well as about the meaning of and activities involved in the games themselves. Many collections and anthologies of children's games have been compiled over the years, such as the Opies' compendia of British playground games (Opie and Opie, 1969) and singing games (Opie and Opie, 1985), Newell's *Games and Songs of American Children* (1963), and Sutton-Smith's *Folk Games of Children* (1972). Indeed, at a time when television viewing consumes as much of children's time as any other single activity apart from *sleep* (Comstock et al., 1978), the value of discovering and documenting alternative activities seems altogether apparent.

But games are more than just recreation. They are also part of the serious business of growing up and play vital developmental and socializing functions -- physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional. To the psychologist Alfred Adler, children's games were not the mere haphazard constructions of parents and teachers but potent educational media, "stimuli for the spirit, fantasy and life-technique of the child." Adler saw games as nothing less than a child's profession: "The preparation for the future can be seen in every game" (Adler, 1927).

He was referring here to more than the "hard" physical and cognitive skills that games cultivate. Games also allow children to acquire crucial socio-emotional skills and core values -- sex roles, occupational roles, attitudes toward war, concepts of law and justice, experience with cooperation and competition, and so on.

Like any agent of socialization, games at once mirror and propagate cultural patterns. Violent games -- "Cops and Robbers," "Cowboys and Indians," "Laser Tag" -- mimic the violence in a society even as they foster it, just as cooperative games both reflect and transmit that social impulse in a culture.

In a sense, these two different views of games -- as cultural indicators and active agents of socialization -- trace two different ways that games can instruct. The socialization function, obviously, implies a process that might be called *participatory learning* -- that is, learning through play. In addition, the status of games as cultural indicators, that is as embodiments of dominant cultural values and patterns of social behavior, implies another way that games can be used to instruct: it seems likely that children (and adults, for that matter) might learn a considerable amount from *observing others* playing games through a process that might be termed *reflective learning*. In other words, it is possible to learn by watching as well as by playing. Consequently, the Portland Children's Museum is developing interpretive video-based exhibits, depicting games in progress, designed not only to teach children new games but also to: increase their awareness of game-related social processes (e.g., the functions of rules, the importance of structure, the process of negotiating disputes); and to broaden their picture of the ways of children from different neighborhoods, regions, and cultures.

To summarize, then, children's games perform a variety of functions for societies and for children. Games are a way to pass time pleasantly and constructively, a source of specific skills and moral values, a way to develop physically and stay fit, a context for competition and self-expression, and more. Different games make contributions in different ways, and certainly there are games which are in general "better" than others -- more stimulating, constructive, instructive, etc. *All games*, though -- even the ones we rather our children *not* play -- have an impact on children's lives and offer important lessons both to children and to those who study their culture and development.

The Games Project: Overview and Methods

The project described here was a pilot for a long-term program on the part of the Portland Children's Museum. There were several different components, including library research, field observation of games in context, interviewing children

and park supervisors, videotaping games and other playground activities, the production of video documentaries on the project, the production of prototype video exhibits for the Museum, and the development of ideas for Museum activities in the area of children's playground games. The remainder of this article will describe some of these activities and the observations or results that have come from them.

Field observation

The study was carried out in three playground locations in the Portland, Oregon area during the summer of 1986: an inner city Portland Parks program, a suburban elementary school, and a semi-rural small-town summer recreational program. The first steps at each of these locations was to spend two or three full days observing and recording play activities and talking to children and supervisors, in an effort both to comprehend the context for game-playing and to identify a specific game for detailed examination during a later visit. Observations were recorded both in detailed written field notes and on videotape.

Video recording

As already mentioned, the general observation process involved some video recording of the scope and context of the play activities occurring at each location. In addition to this sort of "around-the-playground" videotaping, there were more specific sorts of information collected on videotape:

1. *An in-depth recording* at each location of *one game* that seemed particularly promising from the standpoint of developing prototype exhibits for the Museum -- we called these "focus games."
2. *Interviews with children and park supervisors.* At each location two or three of the participants in the focus game were interviewed on videotape. The interview was aimed at eliciting a child's understanding of the structure of the game and his or her feelings about it -- why it was fun, how people felt while playing, why the rules were important, and so on. In addition, the supervisor or school principal was interviewed on a range of topics -- the demographics of the neighborhood, the general characteristics of the park or school, the play activities that went on, the importance of games in the lives of children, and the potential value to educators of a video collection of children's games.

Video productions

Eight hours of video were shot during the course of the project. All of the original tape has been logged and set aside for archival purposes. In addition, two types of edited pieces were created: (1) two documentaries which describe its goals and processes, as well as some of our observations and findings of the project itself; (2) three short (three to four minute) depictions of the focus games designed to serve as prototypes for future video exhibits and/or teaching tools for passing the games along to new groups of children.

An Example of Some Findings and Observations

As already indicated, the project was conducted at three locations and focused on different games at these locations. The activities that occurred at one of the three settings can convey the flavor of the project.

Powell Valley grade school playground

Powell Valley School is an elementary school in Gresham, a Portland bedroom community. The school draws from a predominantly white, middle class neighborhood. The playground is typical for such schools -- large, open, grassy fields for soccer, tag and other open space activities, a covered surface with basketball hoops and patterns for hopscotch, a large sandbox, climbing structures, tetherball poles, swings, slides and other standard playground equipment. During our visits, the most popular activities and games included: soccer, sandbox construction and excavation, "handball" (using a large rubber playground ball bounced off a wall), dodgeball, basketball, free exercise on the parallel bars and rings, freeze tag, tetherball, play with popular toys (Transformers, My Little Pony), and a variety of circle games such as "Duck-Duck-Goose."

One of the most striking patterns of play at this school was the separation between boys and girls. Almost without exception, the athletic games were played by boys and the circle games or singing games were played by girls. The school's principal confirmed that this pattern was not confined to the days we visited. Indeed, she said that the rigid gender separation seemed impervious to considerable encouragement on the part of staff for children to engage in non-gender-typical activities.

Focus game: Down by the Banks. The game we selected to record in detail was a circle game -- played by the girls -- called Down by the Banks. The game is played during this chant:

*Down by the banks of the Hankety Panky,
Where the bullfrogs jump from bank to banky,
With-a epps! ipes! opes!
Bee-stoppin', belly-floppin',
Ker-plunk!*

In theory, any number can play the game. In practice it seemed to work best with eight to ten players. The players gather in a circle and clasp hands, then they all begin the chant. On the first beat of the chant, the girl chosen to begin takes one hand away from the girl on her right and slaps the hand of the girl on her left. This slap is passed around the circle in rhythm to the chant -- that is, on every downbeat of the chant another girl is slapped until they reach "ker-plunk." Whomever is the last to be slapped (on the "plunk") is eliminated and goes to the center of the circle. A new round then begins.

As the game continues and more players are eliminated, the center gets to be too small for the growing number of people who have been eliminated. They leave the center while the game continues until a final player is left. When the game gets down to just two remaining participants, instead of slapping hands, they clasp right hands and go back and forth in a sawing motion (this is called "doing the saw") in time with the chant, and the one whose hand is extended at the end is the winner.

Simple as it sounds -- and indeed it is easy to learn -- "Down by the Banks" is a good example of a genre that contributes to a variety of skills, including rhythm, rhyme, language play in general, and hand-eye coordination. It even has the capacity to teach the concept of randomness or chance,

since the process of elimination is (or is perceived to be) random. Interestingly, in spite of the random determination of winners and losers, or ins and outs, the game is quite absorbing, not only in terms of the process, which the girls clearly find highly satisfying and stimulating, but also in terms of the outcome. That is, even though the game requires the same level of skill of all participants, and higher levels are in no way related to "success" or "failure," elimination is taken very hard by some, and winning is felt as a real competitive triumph.

Finally, it was at this location that we found the most poignant evidence that children do engage in a sort of meta-thinking about games. In the course of our interview with a six-year-old participant named Jennifer, we asked how other people felt when they were eliminated toward the end and lost the game. For a few seconds she seemed to skirt the question almost as if she had not understood it. Then a moment of clear awareness came, she dropped her head sadly and said, "Well, they feel pretty bad, because they wanted to have a chance."

Future Program Development

This article and many others have stressed the point that a good game can make a variety of contributions to children's development. It has been noted here that different games have different strengths. Of the games focussed on in this project, for instance, "Down by the Banks" is probably the best at developing verbal skills and aesthetic awareness, while the kick-ball game observed in the urban park setting is best at developing physical fitness and an understanding of the function of rules. Indeed, we observed a broad range of games which provided an equally broad range of useful learning experiences. Any program devoted to documenting children's games such as the one underway at the Portland Children's Museum ought to include a spectrum of games to do justice to this diversity. With this in mind, the Museum is now engaged in a number of activities and exhibits related to children's playground games.

Further collection. Our pilot study made it apparent that the proper medium for collection and exhibition is video. Indeed, the game "Down by the Banks" provides a perfect example of the inadequacy and inefficiency of verbal description. This delightful game can be learned in minutes and in toto from a two-minute video, whereas the verbal description given here offers only a vague sense of its form and flavor. The educators and park supervisors who were interviewed in the course of the study were strong supporters of the concept of using video to convey new games to new groups of children. Plans are underway to develop a broad collection of the playground games of the region, a collection which will begin to reflect the kind of diversity to which reference has been made above.

Further interviews. The comments of both children and educators/supervisors promise to be valuable supplements to any "raw" collection of games. The children interviewed had some important things to say to other children, and their recorded comments will form a part of future exhibition. As for the supervisors, their support for the process of collecting games was unanimous and their insights on how to implement the goals of such a process are essential.

Programs for dissemination. If one of the goals of such a project is to provide a pedagogic resource to those in need, then it is necessary to provide a system for getting the materials out to the schools and playgrounds that need it. One effective means of accomplishing this is to develop a sort of lending library of videotapes. Each tape can document several games. The development of such a system is a first-order priority, although it is dependent upon the acquisition of an adequate collection of recorded games.

Development of video exhibits. Beyond the documentation and dissemination of documented games, it is logical for a museum to be involved in some interpretive activity. As previously mentioned, children can learn from games in two ways, by playing them and by thinking about them. A series of video exhibits is envisioned in which games are displayed in an interpretive context. That is, in addition to the footage of games in progress, selective observations and comments of children and perhaps adults will be provided to stimulate reflection on, among other things, the importance of games, the effects of structure and rules and the ways other children play and interact. The logistics of display are yet to be worked out, but the exhibits will be arranged so that children themselves are in control of the video system which displays the information.

Games classes. The exhibit just described will be controlled and observed by children and other visitors -- most often parents, teachers -- on their own with little formal input on the part of regular Museum staff or volunteers. Beyond this exposure, however, a series of classes is envisioned in which Museum volunteers or staff will teach children -- in some cases with parents and other adults -- new games in a group setting. The Museum provides a series of arts and crafts classes for children and parents. Similar classes focused on games seem a logical extension of this activity. The adult guidance and the more formal instructional context will no doubt be more effective at the transmission of games than will the more casual contact with in-place exhibits.

Games archives. If games are important cultural and historical phenomena, then a collection of information on games ought to be of considerable interest to those who study children's or contemporary culture. The Museum's intent is to become a resource for scholars in the social sciences and humanities interested in the study of children's games. The Museum would provide raw material, both on video and in the form of interview transcripts, for scholarly analysis and research. As previously mentioned, the pilot study alone led to several hours of recorded material, both of observations of playground behavior and games in progress, and extensive interviews with children and adult caretakers or supervisors. This unedited raw material offers a wealth of information on how American children interact in a game setting.

Long-term plans at the Museum include the development of appropriate archiving and tape logging procedures, as well as appropriate storage methods, such as videodiscs to make this material accessible and useful to researchers.

This article has outlined some of the key elements and outcomes of a project on children's games that spanned most of a summer. In the course of this project, a tremendous amount of information was collected, and in its analysis, as many questions were raised as were answered by the research. The purpose of the project was to provide a springboard for future program development -- to explore methods of observation and collection, develop materials and rationales to be used in fund raising, provide ideas for exhibitry and educational programs, and so on. There is a wealth of play activities to record, and a range of interactions in which games are shared or invented. The potential universe for study extends well beyond the area of Portland or the Pacific Northwest, encompassing the United States and further afield.

Obviously, the resources of any children's museum are not sufficient to accomplish an exhaustive audiovisual record of children's playground games, and so efforts must be selective, purposeful, and seek representativeness rather than exhaustiveness. Yet within the limitations it seems apparent that the children's museum is an especially appropriate locus for the systematic collection, interpretation and propagation of children's games. It also seems logical to base such efforts in a medium such as video which is not only attractive to children, but also produces a remarkably faithful visual and audio record economically. Whatever the research method, the need is clear: if games are part of the serious business of growing up as well as the playful business of being a child, they merit serious research attention and careful analysis so that their meaning for children and the culture as a whole can be better understood.

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